



HALCYON SANCTUS: Vig. & Horsf.

HALCYON SANCTUS, *Vig. and Horsf.*

Sacred Halcyon.

Sacred Kingsfisher, Phill. Bot. Bay, pl. in p. 156.—White's Voy., pl. in p. 193.

Halcyon Sanctus, Vig. and Horsf. in Linn. Trans., vol. xv. p. 206.—Gould, Syn. of Birds of Aust., Part III.

Halcyon sacra, Jard. and Selb. Ill. Orn., vol. ii. pls. 96 and 97.

Dacelo chlorocephala, var. β . Less. Traité Orn., p. 246.

Kingsfisher of the Colonists.

Kūn-yeë-nūk of the Aborigines, Western Australia.

ON reference to the synonyms given above, it will be seen that a difference of opinion is entertained from the authors of the "Illustrations in Ornithology" respecting this species being identical with the *Halcyon collaris* of Mr. Swainson, a bird which I have not yet seen from Australia, although it may possibly be found in the northern part of that continent, since it is common in Java; and I find that Mr. Swainson, in his recently published "Classification of Birds," has arranged them as distinct.

The Sacred Halcyon does not inhabit Van Diemen's Land, but is very generally dispersed over the Australian continent. I have specimens from nearly every locality: those from Port Essington on the north are precisely identical with those of the south coast; on the other hand, those inhabiting Western Australia are a trifle larger in all their measurements, but otherwise present no differences of sufficient importance to warrant their being considered as distinct.

It is a summer resident in New South Wales and throughout the southern portion of the continent, retiring northwards after the breeding-season. It begins to disappear in December, and by the end of January few are to be seen: solitary individuals may, however, be met with even in the depth of winter. They return again in spring, commencing in August, and by the middle of September are plentifully dispersed over all parts of the country, inhabiting alike the most thickly wooded brushes, the mangrove-forests which border, in many parts, the armlets of the sea, and the more open and thinly timbered plains of the interior, often in the most dry and arid situations far distant from water; and it would appear that, as is the case with many of the insectivorous birds of Australia, a supply of that element is not essential to its existence, since, from the localities it is often found breeding in, it must necessarily pass long periods without being able to obtain it.

The brilliant and metallic lustre of its plumage renders it a conspicuous object in the bush: its loud piercing call, also, often betrays its presence, particularly during the season of incubation, when the bird becomes more and more clamorous as the tree in which its eggs are deposited is approached by the intruder. The note most frequently uttered is a loud *pee-pee*, continued at times to a great length, resembling a cry of distress. It sits very upright, generally perching on a small dead branch for hours together, merely flying down to capture its prey, and in most instances returning again to the site it has just left. Its food is of a very mixed character, and varies with the nature of the localities it inhabits. It greedily devours the mantis, grasshoppers and caterpillars, not refusing lizards and very small snakes, all of which are swallowed whole, the latter being killed by beating their heads against a stone or other hard substance, after the manner of the Common Kingsfisher. Specimens killed in the neighbourhood of salt-marshes had their stomachs literally crammed with crabs and other crustaceous animals; while engaged in the capture of which it may be observed sitting silently on the low mangrove-bushes skirting the pools which every receding tide leaves either dry or with a surface of wet mud, upon which crabs are to be found in abundance. I have never seen it plunge into the water after fish like the true Kingsfishers, and I believe it never resorts to that mode of obtaining its prey. On the banks of the Hunter its most favourite food is the larvæ of a species of ant, which it procures by excavating holes in the nests of this insect which are constructed around the boles and dead branches of the *Eucalypti*, and which resemble excrescences of the tree itself.

The season of nidification commences in October and lasts till December, the hollow spouts of the gum and boles of the apple trees being generally selected as a receptacle for the eggs, which are four or five in number, perfectly white, one inch and a line in length, and ten lines in diameter.

The sexes present no difference either in their size or colouring, and the young are only distinguished by being of a less brilliant hue, and by the wing-coverts and feathers of the breast being edged with brown.

Crown of the head, back, and scapularies dull green; wings and tail green, slightly tinged with blue; ear-coverts, and an obscure circle bounding the green of the head, greenish-black; rump verditer green; throat white; line from the nostrils over the eye, nuchal band, and all the under surface buff, becoming deeper on the flanks; bill black, the basal portion of the under mandible flesh-white; feet flesh-red, tinged with brown; irides dark brown.

The Plate represents an old and a young bird of the natural size.